

Vietnam War Steers Airman to Medicine

Blackanthem Military News, SOUTHWEST ASIA, May 19, 2006

He was only 6 years old when he saw a dead soldier lying in the street holding a rifle up in the air. He couldn't tell whether the man was American or Vietnamese because the body was burned.

"During the Tet Offensive of 1968, our house was damaged from explosives," said Lt. Col. (Dr.) Paul Doan of the 379th Expeditionary Medical Group. "We had to move to the central highlands, where the Viet Cong and the Vietnamese army had been battling for days, leaving many to die on the streets."

Doan's father, a pilot and navigator, had stayed behind in Saigon to continue with the fight. He was a colonel and a director of air operations in the South Vietnamese air force.

In 1975, when Doan was in his early teens, he, his brothers and grandmother were part of a mass evacuation to the United States for people who were associated with the military.

Again, his father stayed behind as long as he could, until tanks rolled into the presidential palace. Doan said his father escaped on the last Marine helicopter out of Saigon.

"I was saddened by the loss of the country, for the loss of the freedom of those left behind and for the sacrifices made by both the U.S. and Vietnamese soldiers," Doan said.

Due to the separate departures, the Doan family members were separated for a few months. The family was encamped with others at Camp Pendleton, Calif., staying in large tents with about 50 other people. The father's journey took him to the opposite coast at Eglin Air Force Base, Fla.

Soon after the Doan family reunited in Florida, they moved to Sanford, Fla., where they were sponsored by a church group.

"After seeing my parents having to start all over again in their mid-40s from scratch, I knew I wanted to succeed and pursue a medical career that involved relief of suffering and promotion of peace," Doan said.

His father first worked at a gas station, selling fish bait to tourists. Because he had interacted with U.S. military advisors on a daily basis, his English skills enabled him to find a job teaching English as a second language at a local community college.

Four of the five brothers, including Doan, worked at a McDonald's restaurant and mowed lawns on the weekends. Everyone contributed their paychecks to support the family of seven, all the while enduring prejudice stemming from the U.S. involvement in Vietnam.

"The perception at the time was that the Vietnamese didn't care, but they did -- same as the Iraqi people now," Doan said.

Although he was just a young teenager, Doan said he could tell the difference between communism and democracy.

"Democracy promotes freedom through the people, and communism promotes a society controlled by the government," he said.

"I believe in the mission of the Air Force -- defending the U.S. and promoting freedom around the world," said Doan. "I also felt a gratitude to the U.S. armed forces, especially the U.S. Air Force, for supporting South Vietnam's efforts in defending their fledgling democracy."

After graduating from Duke University, Doan attended medical school through an Air Force program.

"I could've gotten a scholarship for other medical schools, but for my gratitude to the Air Force, I wanted to help alleviate any pain and suffering for the armed forces members," said Doan, who has served in the military for 17 years.

He is the chief of aerospace medicine at a deployed location and fills the same duties at his home station of Barksdale Air Force Base, La.

From family physician to flight surgeon, Doan's ambition and accolades have paved the way for many Vietnamese-Americans. He was the first Vietnamese-American to attend Duke University after the Vietnam War. He was the first of his nationality to be an Air Force medical officer at the Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences in Bethesda, Md. Last year, he was selected as the Yale University Johnson and Johnson International Health Physician Scholar. This honor took Doan back to Vietnam, more than 30 years after he was evacuated.

"When I left Saigon, I told myself I'd be back," he said. "So when I landed at the same airport I had left from, a flood of emotion came over me as I realized I did make it back. I had an emotional tie with the past, and I was able to let that go."

Doan's wife and young son accompanied him on the one-month trip, where he taught Vietnamese medical staff on topics including advanced treatment of heart diseases. He also visited his hometown.

"I barely recognized anything except my school," said the colonel, whose home had been converted into office space.

He had an opportunity to reconnect with some aunts and uncles. Although three decades had passed, he said, the family bond was still there.

"Overall, it made me feel very grateful to be an American," Doan said. "(Vietnam's) economy has prospered, but you can tell the people are still reluctant to express themselves."

"It's what we're fighting for now," he said. "We're fighting for a cause -- expanding freedom and security for us, our children and for those we liberate. Those are worthy causes to fight for."

Last year, Doan volunteered to serve at Balad Air Base, Iraq. Operating out of tents, he and other physicians performed various procedures from treating limb injuries to neurosurgery. He was also involved in a major research study that will be used to prevent wound infection during medical transport.

Doan said he plans to continue using his training to provide care to the Air Force's aviators, so they can keep taking the fight to the enemy.

By Tech. Sgt. Veronica Aceveda
379th Air Expeditionary Wing Public Affairs